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CHRISTIAN DIVISION—A PRIOR CLAIM

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The subject of church union is just now being discussed as a primary problem of Christianity. But does the matter of organic unity really touch any profound interest of ordinary men? If church union is to be worth anything it must represent a vital passion, and not a nice balancing of subtle distinctions. As a matter of fact the great issue of today is the valuation of human life. Industrial and international problems really involve the question whether men can manage to organize in a fellowship which recognizes human rights. The fundamental test which Christianity must apply is whether the Kingdom of Heaven is actually to come on earth by human consecration and co-operation, or whether we shall despair of and depreciate ideals of social evolution. Here is a fundamental cleavage in modern Christianity which cannot be ignored.

What a dust of words the church has stirred up as it has ploughed its slow way down the centuries! Even in this day, when so much good time is being wasted wondering why Smith does not go to church, the publishers continue to bring out religious books in quantity almost equal to the ubiquitous novels.

No will one deny that some of this verbal flood has influenced mightily the course of history, despite Mr. Wells's ability to tell the story of our race without mentioning John Calvin. Yet there comes at times a suspicion, when one views the massed rows of apologetics and homiletics and apocalyptic and hermeneutics and all the rest (and remembers how much larger an array of the same it is now impossible to view) that we churchmen, if we have managed to obey the apostolic injunction against thinking of ourselves and our words more highly than we ought, have committed another sin in taking ourselves and our words more seriously than we have any business to.

Just now we are gushing forth on church union. Our contributions range all the way from the suggestions of the Anglican bishops at Lambeth, the Council on Faith and

Order, and the ill-fated “tendencies” of the Interchurch World Movement, to the pronouncement of the Sage of Emporia, Walt Mason, who finds in church division the root of all our troubles, and in church union their solution. One who makes an effort to keep abreast of Christian thought finds it necessary to read a seemingly endless array of words, all presumably contributing toward a union of the Christian churches.

To what good?

Read it all, if you have the patience. Then place yourselves as far outside the influence of professional ecclesiastical interests as it is possible for you to do, and ask this question: What is there in all this that touches the spiritual problems in which ordinary men are actually interested? What is there here to which a man who cares little about churchly traditions, but greatly about spiritual power, may run and grip and shout, “See, here is something upon which we may plant a church that will challenge mankind!”?

As it was in the beginning, so is it now (and one fears will be)—polite preachers piously proposing improbable performances, as they would say in the type catalogues. Schemes evolved in committee rooms; discussions that have had their birth in musty studies—parson talk, all of it, even when spoken by laymen, and useless because it has so little connection with the vital issues of life.

The tragedy of our preoccupation with this illusion stands the more starkly in the presence of our failure to deal with issues that *are* vital, and have their direct application to the same questions of church division and union. For while we palaver of orders and ordinations and the acts of legates long dead—and better so!—we are blind to true divisions that spell weal or woe for humanity, establishment or loss for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Sometimes I have heard my clerical friends, especially from among the Anglicans, say that we must have a church

so broad that it can include the symbolism of the high churchman at the same time with the exuberance of the Salvation Army evangelist. But this is not something to be attained by a nice balancing of tradition. If it ever comes it will come spontaneously. If those who work for a union of the churches would think deeper they would see that before we can have a vital church union we must have a vital church division. Today we are mixed up about standards that mean little; at times nothing at all. But let us dare to admit our real lines of division, and we shall perforce find ourselves regrouping in units that will cut across and transcend our present herdings. We shall then have a unity with meaning.

Christian division is an actuality of immense importance to the world. Unfortunately, the church so far has refused to admit this actuality and so, in its very presuppositions, serves notice that it is not a servant of reality, and therefore is unable to play a great part in the problems of our time. If you doubt this, regard our attitude toward two fundamental matters.

We are divided in our conception of the value of the individual and in our attitude toward the Kingdom of Heaven. These are not "the flaccid tissues of long dead issues," but vitalities that cut to the heart of the world's hope. Yet here we are divided, and refuse to face the division.

Always, theoretically, the individual has held supreme value in the Christian church. It is this that has made the Bible such a dangerous book. The depiction of man standing only "a little lower than God" has inspired many a lofty flight of pulpit eloquence.

We are past the day when eloquence will save us. Reality is the demand. We face the test of our *action* as to whether the welfare of every human being is the supremely important matter, be its effect what it may upon the stocks and bonds of our material civilization.

This goes deep. It goes clear down to the fundamental upon which all such conceptions as a League of Nations, and the like, must rest. For, as that brilliant Englishman, Edward Shillito, said not long ago, "Nations must live together; but how can they live in the same house in peace unless they are agreed upon the meaning of human life, and upon its true values and its destiny?" What is true for nations, controlling life politically, is as true for those who control it in any of its other relationships.

Let us admit that it will be hard to force most of the churches to face this demand. It is too easy to sidestep it with words, social creeds, the reports of commissions, and other means of testifying to our verbal impeccability. But this is just the issue. If there is reality in the mission of the church just now, it dare not confine its passion to words. We face the same demand that St. James voiced in the first century of the church's life: "Show me thy faith by thy works." It will be recalled that much of the Epistle of St. James deals with the relative importance of individuals.

What actuality have we faced when we talk about the supreme value of every human soul? We have various tests for membership within our communions. Have any of us yet dared place a test just here? Have any of us announced that we will sternly exclude from our ranks any who, by personal act or the pressure of securities owned, or in any other manner, direct or indirect, lower by one atom the dignity of a single life, or cause one of the world's little ones to stumble?

The experience of the Interchurch World Movement with its report on the steel industry, and of the Young Women's Christian Association with its outline for a Christian order in industry, shows that no such test as this can be made without producing a real division. The moment the church acts upon the implications of a belief in the supremacy of the welfare of every man, that moment it will lose the support and

arouse the antagonism of all the "practical" elements in its ranks. Many, fearing this, will cry out against any such test. It is only the Christian-minded who will welcome it. For they will see that a church practical is a church damned, and that there are modern applications of the experiences of Gideon.

Moreover, they will see that this is not a question to be answered on the basis of expediency, no matter how many denominational colleges and benevolent boards may be hunting endowment. It is a question that tests the church's sense of reality. Here is a division demanded by the condition of the world at this hour. If the church avoids it she will show great adroitness, astuteness, adaptability. And she will, in the act, convince most men that she has no call to a task of world rebuilding.

Inextricably bound up with this issue of the value of the individual goes the question as to whether the Kingdom of Heaven, as portrayed by Jesus, is actually to come on earth, as we have for centuries been praying that it may come. If this is to happen all individual, social, political life is due to be transformed, and our race carried onward to a goal as glorious as the present reality is disheartening.

A large part of Protestantism, and a vigorous part, denies this expectation. An indication of the way in which the church goes dallying along sidetracks is found in its attitude toward these thoroughly consecrated, thoroughly conscientious, and thoroughly calamitous members. Occasionally it condescends to discuss with them subjects such as the theory of scriptural inspiration or the probability of a thousand years of messianic glory just before or after the bodily return of Jesus to earth. But for the most part the church says, "They're mistaken, but what of it?", blind to that vaster heresy which these indorse, that denial of the supreme hope Jesus planted when he taught of the Kingdom that is to be.

Here is a vital division.

One man says, "The Kingdom of Heaven is to be established on earth by the gradual and unceasing upbuilding of the rule of Christ." Another replies, "The Kingdom will only be realized in some future state, when, by a sudden miracle, the Lord will descend with a shout from the sky to sit for a limited period upon a throne in Jerusalem."

One man says, "The race is progressing toward a far-off, divine event, when evil will be overthrown and good completely established." Another replies, "The race is getting worse and worse. Church, state, society, everything, must go on until all is utterly bad, and then the smash-up."

One man says, "I will give my life for the building of the Kingdom." Another replies, "It is unscriptural for you to express such a thought. The Kingdom is not to be built or established, or anything else that implies any place for your puny efforts in its securing. It is to be disclosed by an omnipotent fiat in the hour when God, his patience at an end, wipes out the last vestige of our sorry strivings."

One man says, "We must not rest until every last man has been won to loving allegiance to the Kingdom and its King." Another replies, "It is not the purpose of God to bring more than a select remnant into his Kingdom. He has ordained destruction for the rest."

One man knows Jesus as a savior; another awaits him as a despot. Indeed, it is significant that one of the leaders of the latter group should have written of him as "Kaiser Jesus."

This is a division. Either the church is concerned with building the Kingdom in the world or it is not, and it is meaningless to talk about a church unity which would harbor both ideas within the same fold. The reality of such a division serves to show the more clearly the unreality of the divisions by which the denominations now group themselves.

Two men were looking out of the windows of the Missionary Home in Shanghai last winter, watching the Chinese crowds shifting past through the gathering dusk. One watched

until the lines of pain were etched deep in his face, and when he turned away his voice was scarcely under control.

"Doesn't it almost drive you mad," he cried, "to realize that after all our work we have scarcely begun to affect the edges of that multitude out there?"

His companion replied without a moment of hesitation, and with a complacency complete:

"It might, if you did not know that God has never planned to have us reach those people anyway."

Both those men are casually grouped by their acquaintances as Presbyterians. Yet it is folly to say that they belong to the same church; that they are Christians of the same sort; that they follow the same Christ; that they worship the same God.

In these two illustrations of the demand for clean division there is nothing new. That fact renders the illustrations the more illuminating! In every aspect of the life of the church we are constantly showing an ability to ignore such questions of real moment, the while we concern ourselves with artificial schemes that revolve about shibboleths that are "old, far-off, forgotten." Before vital Christian unity can ever come there must be sharp cleavage where divisions truly exist, after which we can, and will, rally about great facts and hopes that outrange the artificial lines of our present demarcations.